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ABSTRACT

The forces or pressures that have produced a concern for fundamental skills of literacy are briefly considered, and a number of related questions are raised about willingness and capabilities for dealing with the issues in a deliberative, systematic manner. A major premise is the belief that the back-to-basics movement can be understood best in terms of the requirement of minimal competency testing in public schools by state legislatures and the current concern for basic academic competencies in general education at the college level. The back-to-basics movement implies a pervasive belief that the status of literacy in the 1970s is deplorable. The following questions or issues are discussed: (1) What is the evidence for a decline in literacy? (2) Can everyone in a pluralistic society master common reading, writing, and computational skills? Is it desirable that they do so? (3) Can schools and colleges actually teach reading and writing? Do school and college faculties have the resources, methods, and capabilities to actually do so? (4) Is there any genuine evidence that colleges can do what schools have obviously not done? Problems involving minimum competency tests are briefly discussed. It is concluded that the challenge to schools and colleges is to define or refurbish a workable concept of functional literacy in a democratic society with many pluralistic features. (SW)

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WHAT ARE BASICS AND WHY THE CONCERN?*

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The meaning of the back-to-basics movement should be sought in the purposes of education and the opportunities we might have for genuine, constructive reform in the nation's schools and colleges. There are noticeable signs that "educational consciousness" has been raised and there may be, for the first time in many years, a readiness to deal seriously and meaningfully with what is taught and learned under conditions of formal instruction.

To appreciate the circumstances and intensity of the back-to-basics movement, it would help to understand the conflicting forces that have been dominant in education over the past quarter century. Education has undergone a period of growth that is unlikely to be duplicated in the foreseeable future. At the same time, schools and colleges have been challenged to resolve for a democratic society one of its most difficult issues—the divisiveness of cultural pluralism in a racially diverse and ethnically conscious society that has taken pride in the opportunity given its members. Educational reform must take place, therefore, in the wake of intense efforts to reconstruct education for societal purposes. Reform is needed not only because of growth that was too often unplanned and undirected but because of the context of rapid social change in which growth took place.

Given the interplay of forces that education has been subjected to in the past 25 years, the likelihood of reaction should have been evident and reaction was indeed prognosticated in terms of "backlash" or "revolts at the polls." There is disbelief, nonetheless, that a return to a simpler era or a slower educational pace is permissible. Whatever the back-to-basics movement might be, it is something more than a nostalgic urge.

This paper considers briefly the forces or pressures that have produced a concern for fundamental skills of literacy and raises a number of related questions about both our willingness and our capabilities for dealing with the issue in a deliberative, systematic manner. There should be no doubt that complex issues must be resolved in a period when there is a diminished confidence in public schools. Not only are there suspicions of failure but there are feelings of frustration. In a "revolution of rising expectations" we did make progress toward equality of access but we may have been misled into expecting equality of outcomes—a societal goal that was not articulated sufficiently and which we could not reach with the societal efforts made.

A major premise here is the belief that the back-to-basics movement can be understood best in terms of: (a) the requirement of minimal competency testing in public schools by state legislatures, and (b) the current concern for basic academic competencies in general education at the college level. Although the back-to-basics movement has other facets, the restoration of basic education in the elementary school curriculum is either the result of local initiation in isolated cases or the effect of state mandated testing under the rubric of accountability. Efforts to establish the three R's as a trivium in elementary grades and English, math, science, and history as a quadrivium in the high school have been sporadic and sometimes fascinating but are unlikely to sweep the country with fervor.

In much the same manner, efforts to establish performance-based curricula in schools or colleges are indirectly related to the back-to-basics movement. Where performance or competency-based curricula pertain to teacher education, the relevance for elementary and secondary education is obvious, but for the most part, the concern for performance or competency is an attempt to deal with broader, more general issues in education. In brief, it is not merely the decline in literacy that has produced the concern with competency-based education but a host of other dissatisfactions and frustrations. Competency-based education may readily be one of the ways in which schools or colleges deal with the back-to-basics issue but professional education is more likely to be the model than concepts of a classical education, and competency-based education would seem more directly related to the emphasis placed on outcomes or results since the mid-sixties.

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MINIMAL COMPETENCIES IN EDUCATION

The movement toward minimal competency testing in the public schools is an outgrowth of statewide assessment programs and the public's demand for accountability. Although statewide assessment has a varied history, it provides a precedent for testing that is initiated and funded by state agencies, if not controlled by them. Both federal and state legislation have provided the impetus to statewide assessment in the 1970s. Federal funds are available under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and with revisions passed by the last Congress, funds will be available for the improvement of basic skills *per se*. Title II of the Act provides for assistance to local and state agencies in the development of statewide plans for improving achievement in reading, mathematics, and written communication (*Report on Education Research*, 1978).

Although statewide assessment programs have been widely adopted, there is no little confusion of purposes that should be served by such efforts. Some programs were established in response to a need for statewide management information systems, improved budgeting systems, and the assessment of individual cognitive skills. The inconsistency of objectives is shown in responses that indicated some states wanted to improve instruction; others wanted to improve guidance and class placement; while still others were seeking to help students identify problems and special talents that may otherwise go unnoticed (ETS, 1971).

The popularity of minimum competency testing is seen in the rapidity with which a majority of states have mandated minimal standards for promotion or graduation in public schools. At one count, at least 33 states had adopted some kind of requirement that public school students take and/or pass some kind of test that would ensure their competency in basic skills. There appears to be, at least for the moment, an appreciable consensus that minimal standards are matters for the separate states, and there is strong advocacy that as much deference as possible be shown to local or district needs. Whatever form minimal competency may take, there does not seem to be a strong indication that it will be defined by the federal government. Despite the fact that the federal government is now more supportive of "national testing programs" than at any time since enactment of the National Defense Education Act in 1958, there is little reason to expect the development of national tests with national standards or criteria for uniform application across the nation's schools.

While the details of many state programs are still vague, their enforceability in many cases unknown, and their success or failure yet to be determined, substantial agreement on the desirability of improving basic skills can be detected. A majority of the adult population now believes that high school students should pass a standard test of minimal competency before receiving a high school diploma (Gallup, 1978). The general public further believes that if students fail the test, they should receive instruction in courses specially designed to help them and should not merely repeat the test. The test should not be a national test but should be developed on a state or local level and should be based on minimal requirements that are set with local or state needs in view.

Extensive efforts are currently underway to develop tests or assessment techniques that will enable state agencies, school districts, and concerned parents to determine if minimal requirements or standards are met. Educational Testing Service not only is developing tests for the assessment of basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics but has issued a set of guidelines for basic skills assessment. Tests should be used early in the student's school career for diagnostic purposes and several times thereafter to assess progress. Basic skills should not be assessed for graduation purposes unless ample remedial assistance has been offered and students have had multiple opportunity to take the test. Minimum scores should be clearly defined, and usage of such tests should be based on an understanding that reading, writing, and mathematics are separate but related skills (ETS, 1977a).

The gist must surely be that if statewide assessment efforts in the early 1970s were broad-ranging and confused, minimal competency testing in the later years of the decade shows an appreciable convergence of purpose. The language of state legislation has a certain toughness in its requirement that standards be set and that students be required to meet those standards. It is a definite change from most legislation of the 1950s and 1960s that specified requirements in terms of teaching loads, course credits, and facilities. The pressure is undoubtedly on schools to provide, in some acceptable manner, forms of instruction that will ensure reading and writing skills in their graduates. It is this particular pressure that gives the back-to-basics movement its substance and its likelihood of eventual effect on educational policies and practices. Advocacy of a return to basic education in a traditional sense will continue to be an upstream swim and is unlikely to become anything like the pressure for minimum competency testing.

BASIC ACADEMIC COMPETENCIES IN EDUCATION

The push for basic academic competencies in higher education is part of the same picture and can best be seen in the requirement of systemwide testing at the college and university level. The University System of Georgia has required, for several years, reading and writing tests for students in the closing quarter of their lower division work. Failure rates on the test vary appreciably from college to college, but a close generalization would be that approximately one-third of the students taking the tests do not pass them on the first attempt. It has been observed, however, that those taking the tests a second time are now more likely to pass than they were in the first years the tests were required. The policy decision concerning the reading and writing tests for "rising juniors" was made in 1969 and was specifically set to assure other units in the University System that transferring students "possess the basic competence of academic literacy, that is, certain minimum skills of reading and writing."

Other pressures for the development of basic academic competencies can be seen in the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's recent recommendations that: (a) special effort be given to the development of basic skills by primary, secondary, and postsecondary institutions; (b) comprehensive examinations be given to graduating seniors; and (c) general education be improved by placing greater emphasis on advanced learning skills. Both Educational Testing Service and the American College Testing Program (ACT) are developing measures of basic academic competencies that should be expected from general education at the college level. There is appreciable agreement with the Carnegie Foundation's assessment of general or liberal education as "a disaster area," and many colleges are apparently seeking ways to strengthen or undergird the general education component of the undergraduate curriculum. Several colleges in Tennessee, for example, are conducting projects specifically designed to identify "performance indicators" for basic academic competencies. A commendable effort has been made to define the minimal competencies that should be expected of all college graduates, regardless of their area of specialization. This effort is in keeping with the Carnegie Foundation's contention that while basic skills are the responsibility of elementary and secondary schools, colleges and universities must assist the public schools in the teaching of basic skills and must continue to meet the needs of students for general skills in reading and writing at the advanced levels usually associated with college achievement (Branscomb et al. 1977).

Other efforts to deal with the "crisis in literacy" can be seen in the increasing number of colleges and universities that are adopting some kind of performance or proficiency test that will demonstrate functional or basic literacy. The various attempts to establish core curricula or common curricular requirements for undergraduates usually give particular concern to reading and writing competencies. In all probability, more experimentation and sytematic study of basic skills is taking place at the present time than at any time in the nation's history.

In brief, the concern for minimal competency in the public schools and the attention given basic academic competencies on college campuses imply a pervasive belief that the status of literacy in the 1970s is deplorable. Skeptics are frequently heard, and many will argue that literacy is not in a state of decline; that the back-to-basics movement is a bit of wishful thinking for a past that probably never existed; and that if there is a decline in reading, writing, and mathematical skills, it will not be retarded by further testing in school. A different perspective is available—and can be supported. The concern for basic skills of literacy is both healthy and constructive. It reflects a continuing belief in education, and despite the disappointments and frustrations of recent years, there is an expectation that schools and colleges will remedy the situation. State legislation for minimal competency testing is a direct and fairly clear way of expressing public expectations for public schools. Testing requirements and remedial coursework at the college level is a strong indication that a serious issue has been recognized and that institutions of postsecondary education are trying to deal with the problem as it now exists.

BACK-TO-BASICS-ISSUES

There are, of course, numerous questions that should be answered, and there will undoubtedly be unanticipated and unintended outcomes. The situation is, by no means, free of ambiguities, and the attitude of many teachers and instructors must surely be ambivalent. Some of the questions or issues that are involved may be identified as follows:

1. What is the evidence for a decline in literacy?
2. Can everyone in a pluralistic society master common reading, writing, and computational skills? Is it even desirable that they do so?
3. Can schools and colleges actually teach reading and writing? Do school and college faculties have the resources, methods, and capabilities to actually do so?
4. Is there any genuine evidence that colleges can do what schools have obviously not done? That is, can basic skills actually be taught at the college level if they have not been mastered in 12 years of public schooling?

Other questions are easily raised—some in disbelief and others in a tactical sense: Will not teachers "teach the test" and forget about other more important matters? If minimal competencies are defined, will they not then become the only goals and objectives of education? Who is to decide what minimal competencies are—and how they shall be measured? Does not minimal competency testing place additional power and/or influence in the hands of national testing agencies that are already too dominant in American education? And lastly, are they fair?

WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE?

The evidence for a decline in literacy is a mixture of test results, casual-but-widespread observation, and numerous-but-indirect inferences. Both test score decline and grade inflation have been much cited as evidence of eroding standards. Critics counter that the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), the best known test of academic ability, is not actually a test of basic skills and should be used primarily to predict college grades. What such critics may ignore is the decline in virtually all ability and achievement test scores. Decline is not quite as evident in a few achievement tests, such as science, but decline is clearly evident in tests purporting to measure vocabulary, reading comprehension, and general knowledge. Studies of the SAT support the contention that it has been a constant in a period of rapid change (*On Further Examination*, 1977).

The evidence for a decline in writing skills is mostly observational but nonetheless substantial. There are reasons to believe that the American reading and writing public has always been a small proportion of the general population. Census data clearly show an increase in

literacy that is quite remarkable when taken at face value. Most indices of literacy, however, are pegged to years of schooling and are not based on either observation or measurement of reading and writing *per se*. Comparisons with the past must be adjusted for the fact that years of schooling have definitely increased. Massive, if not universal, education did become a reality in the last decade. It is this fact, plus the lack of evidence for any increase in literacy, that accounts for much of the disappointment. If four years of formal schooling was once thought to establish basic literacy, it is now unrealistic to assume that six years is sufficient.

The cause for concern is not whether contemporary students read or write as well as their grandparents—but whether they read and write as well as parents, employers, neighbors, taxpayers, and other publics have a right to expect them to read and write. Given the commitment that has been made to public education in American society and given the conditions under which schools have met the challenge of rapid social change, there should be little doubt that something has happened to our notions of literacy in the past 20 years. Indeed, the most telling phrase in the SAT panel report is "a decade of distraction." Schools have been successful in doing what they are asked to do; in recent years they have not been asked to stress or emphasize reading and writing.

CAN EVERYONE LEARN?

Whether everyone *can* and *should* learn to read and write a common language is not the foolish question it might appear to be. There is not only the question of whether the fundamental skills of literacy are beyond the grasp of some, surely small, segment of the American population but whether there is a willingness to learn common skills and knowledge by some groups who fear the loss of cultural diversity. Black English, bilingual education, and some forms of alternative schooling are obviously a rejection of standard English as the first priority of education. There is no contention that certain students cannot learn standard English, but some "prefer not to." Since language and culture are so obviously intertwined, the sociocultural backgrounds of many students in a pluralistic society pose a severe barrier to their efforts to learn what might be regarded as common patterns of speaking, reading, and writing. If public schools have been perceived as a means of cultural assimilation in the past, there have been definite pressures on schools not to insist too strongly on common skills, knowledge, and values in the past 10 or 15 years.

Motivation is a much abused and misunderstood concept in education, but it should have better explanatory value for understanding the decline in literacy than human capacities that may be too limited for educational purposes. Failure to master fundamental or basic skills would not seem the results of inability as much as the lack of motives, incentives, and other values that may or may not stem from linguistic or cultural barriers. In many cases, it may easily be the lack of social support and reinforcement from family, friends, and community that determines the extent to which basic skills are learned. There is much in social learning theory to suggest that aspirations and expectations are as important as abilities and much more of a sociocultural determinant of the learning that takes place in school.

CAN EVERYONE TEACH?

To inquire seriously about the capabilities of schools and colleges for instruction in basic skills is to question the availability of methods, resources, and technology for the task. Many experiences with compensatory, remedial, or developmental education at the college level indicate quite strongly that reading, writing, and other basic skills cannot easily be re-cycled. Students who have not acquired fundamental skills in 12 years of public schooling are unlikely candidates for review or re-hash courses pegged to a 10 or 12 week quarter. An accelerated coverage of concepts and principles that have not been grasped in the past is unlikely to help students who have been sectioned or placed in special courses for that purpose.

A primary reason for questioning instructional capabilities is the fact that few teachers have been trained or prepared for the task. Education is a profession that has become specialized and advanced just as other professions have. As taught in most universities, teacher education programs are an amazing array of specialties and subdisciplines that students enter in pursuit of their own interests and preferences. Certification by state agencies often requires courses that are highly specialized rather than courses that are general or common. In other words, most teachers in the public schools are not prepared to teach reading and writing but English, science, mathematics, or history.

Ambitious attempts at curricular reform in science and mathematics during the 1960s suggest that it is, by no means, easy to train and prepare teachers for mission-oriented purposes. It would appear much more easy to develop instructional materials and courses such as was done in the biological and physical sciences and in mathematics. Should the back-to-basics movement become an educational mission for which society and school were willing to gear, it would require not only resources in the form of materials and equipment but it would take revisions in the incentive-and-reward systems of most schools and teaching faculties. The current status of teacher "professionalization" or militancy further suggests that the task will not be easy.

CAN COLLEGES DO BETTER?

The difficulties of teacher education are compounded in the preparation of college instructors. Specialization is far more pronounced and subdisciplines are a particular function of intellectual interests and needs. Teaching students with "reading and writing difficulties" tends to be the lowest rung on academic ladders that are prized for the lofty ascent they permit. College instructors are drawn to fundamental courses in reading and writing either by interests and concerns that their colleagues may not understand or by the absence of opportunity to

teach anything else. Such courses tend to be sufficiently challenging for three or four years only, and turnover in personnel is the bane of all instruction at the freshman, introductory, or "fundamentals" level.

The absence of formal preparation is particularly noticeable at the college level. Too frequently instructors are assigned remedial or review courses without teaching competencies that are specially related to the diagnosis of learning difficulties, developmental concepts and procedures, or assessment techniques as such. Successful instructors will often spend a great deal of time re-inventing the wheel or learning through trial-and-error which approaches and procedures are effective with students. Too frequently college instructors will find courses at the remedial and introductory levels in conflict with their reasons for seeking a teaching position and a contradiction of what they studied in their own graduate programs. Perhaps no better example of the conflict can be given than the perennial clash between language and literature. Almost without exception, teaching interests will center on the latter while learning needs fall in the former.

There is little evidence, then, that colleges can do a better job of teaching fundamental or basic skills than public schools—and a great deal of evidence that reading, writing, and computational skills should be more thoroughly mastered in the early years of formal schooling. Social promotion policies are only a partial explanation of why one level of education has passed along its "failures and mistakes" to the next level. Given a society in which social and economic mobility is so important and given a social system in which education is the primary steppingstone in upward mobility, it would have been impossible to adopt "hard and fast" standards for student advancement during the past 10 or 15 years. Colleges and universities have no alternative but to do the best they can with problems that have been accruing for quite some time.

OTHER QUESTIONS AND ISSUES

The argument that the test may become the objective is too thin to worry about. There are definite possibilities that teachers may emphasize too much the student's preparation for the test—but if, in doing so, the teacher actually assists the student in developing basic skills, the purpose of the test will be served and education should be improved. The point is that minimal competency tests must be designed to bring out the kinds of performance they should help improve. It is highly relevant that in the development of skills such as reading and writing, students should not only be tested before and after instruction but frequently in-between.

The possibility that minimal competency tests will define only the floor and give no help with other standards is a real one. Perhaps it is best to emphasize at all stages of minimal competency testing that it is only a beginning and must necessarily define standards of performance to which later standards and expectations can be tied. With success in meeting minimal competencies, both students and teachers would be expected to "raise their sights." This, too, is explained by social learning theory. Otherwise, it is difficult to buy the argument that because society now expects students to meet minimal competency standards, teachers will teach only minimal competencies and nothing else.

The question of who is to decide minimal competencies is, perhaps, the most difficult of all. Some of us would like to respond that minimal competencies should be defined by professional teachers and educators and should be based on careful, systematic study of student capabilities and societal expectations. Given the political context in which educational decisions are increasingly made, however, it is wise to recognize the pressures for participatory democracy and to provide for representative deliberation as a means of formulating public policy. In short, minimal competencies in education must have "political validity" as well as educational relevance and value. It will be necessary to define minimal competencies in a deliberative process that is acceptable to all affected by the outcome.

The problems of measurement will most likely be intensified before they are solved. For the moment, advocates of both criterion-referenced testing and norm-referenced testing can be heard in full insistence that the other is wrong. It will help both groups of advocates if they remember that the American public is uninterested in the technical merits of tests and is demanding, at least for the moment, useful results. It will also help if they remember that whatever shape or form minimal competency testing might take, it must meet certain expectations of rational development and use. To be acceptable, to have "political validity," tests must serve rational, logical, or fairly direct purposes and must be recognizable as measures of the basic skills actually taught in school.

The increasing influence of national testing agencies must be dealt with in the same way that "unwanted bigness" is countered in other areas of education. National testing agencies are influential because they have professional and technical resources that are desired by educational consumers and users. State agencies can seldom duplicate or match the expertise that is so readily purchased from testing organizations. Some colleges and universities may well have the resources, facilities, and personnel to develop such tests as they may need, but few schools or local school districts are likely to have such. All things considered, it is most unlikely that minimal competency tests can be developed in such a way as to carry either the prestige or the influence of the SAT. Minimal competency tests must be far more utilitarian, and it is most unlikely that any testing agency can corner the market.

The final question of fairness is one that deserves full consideration. It is the basis of litigation over competency testing in Florida and will become even more of a central question as other states implement legislative mandates for minimal competency testing. There is no doubt that paper-and-pencil tests continue to reveal racial and ethnic group differences that are unwanted. And there is nothing in minimal competency testing or measures of basic academic competencies that gives immunity from charges of bias.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

A perennial issue in education is the distinction that must be made between education that is instrumental in the sense of facilitating further learning—and education that is consummatory or terminal. One is valued in its own right and need not lead anywhere; the other is valued for what it permits at a later stage of development. The back-to-basics issue is, in a sense, based on that distinction. Competencies in reading, writing, and computation are believed to be crucial for the continued learning that full participation in contemporary society appears to demand. Basic literacy has been thought to have a special meaning in democratic societies, and freedom of the press is predicated on the rights of individual citizens or voters to read and consider the political choices they must make. There is a traditional argument that the history of western civilization is encoded in print and those who would understand the Judeo-Hellenic-European lineage of their ideas and values must read in order to do so. There is a religious argument concerning the individual conscience and the right to read the Holy Scriptures. There is the highly pragmatic argument that reading and writing are essential in a world of work, in daily living, and in fulfilling community or civic responsibilities.

Basic skills or competencies are thus seen as instrumental to virtually all that comes later. A decline in fundamental skills of literacy, real or imagined, is seen therefore as a crucial issue by many critics and observers of American education. There are expressions of concern at all levels of education about the lack of adequate preparation for the quality of instruction that level provides. Neither graduate nor professional education is immune to complaints that students cannot read or write—and each lower level passes the complaint along.

At a time when the American public has been convinced that it was raising educational standards and making education available to all who would seek its benefits, there has been, many critics believe, a continuous erosion of those competencies or skills most firmly believed to make further education possible. To some it has become a paradox of unbelievable dimensions—and to others it has become the shame of American education, fulfilling the age-old prophecy that when you give something away, no one appreciates it.

The challenge to schools and colleges is to define or refurbish a workable concept of functional literacy in a democratic society with many pluralistic features. Standards must be set that are realistic, acceptable, and useful—and such standards must be reconciled with concepts of fairness that have been, in recent years, particularly strong. Time must be taken to develop a suitable philosophy or theory of teaching and learning that will permit and encourage the mastery of basic literary competencies. A confusion of purposes and means must be lessened—and there must be an increased willingness to work with the problem even though someone else is responsible for it. There is nothing in the national experience of the past two decades to suggest that the challenge can be easily met. At the same time, there is no "hard and fast" evidence that it can't be met.

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